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What I have Seen in New York.

A lecture by Oliver Dyer, delivered at Cooper Institute, Sept. 24.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—Mr. Packard remarked that it would probably be impossible to cram within the limits of one lecture all that I have to tell you about New York. As to that, I have only to say that it has taken me fourteen years to see the things which I have seen about New York; and I suppose it would take me three times fourteen years to tell of them. And, as prolonging the lecture to such an extent might interfere with some of your engagements, I should not think of attempting it.

The trouble is really to select what to say. People are so incredulous about these matters. I don't know as I have ever made a statement on the subject that has not been disputed; and I do not suppose I shall tell you an incident this evening which you will not have some doubt about. You will, perhaps, think it is impossible that such things can be; and I shall not blame you if you do.

Altogether, credit what I may tell you. Even my friend Mr. Packard, who has paid me for telling him some of these things, has had doubts upon the subject. I wrote him a sketch for the October number of his Monthly, entitled "Ann Rachel," sketching the condition of an aged negro woman I once found starving and freezing to death in a gutter, and describing the locality where I found her. When Mr. Packard read that sketch, I saw that he doubted the truthfulness of the whole thing—he doubted that there was any such place in New York as I described. I could see that plainly, and I did not say it. But a few days ago he came to me, not supposing I would understand what he was after, and wanted to know "if it would be convenient for me to take him down to that place which I had described—he would like to see Fish Alley and the surroundings." I said: "Certainly let us go down."

We found Fish Alley, a narrow little tunnel running from Oak street to posterior regions. We found the row of tenement houses I had described; and in the row the very house in which Ann Rachel was found. And then, happening to see something which I knew from long experience would present some, I told Mr. Packard one that I could give him a good deal of time to look at it. He went down with me, and I showed him a woman sitting out of doors, although it was a chilly, damp, inclement day, bare headed, bare necked, and bare footed, with one shiny dress on—nothing more—sitting on a blue snook block or over shirt. I knew why she was sitting out there, sewing, and I told Mr. Packard that. He did not know, and I also saw that he looked very much surprised, as I expected he would. "Let us step down into the cellar like basement that woman lives in," he said. We stepped down with us. On getting into the basement, the first object that met our eyes was a babe lying in a cradle. I asked the woman how old it was. She said eight months. She said it had been sick several weeks. We could see that at once. It was reduced to a skeleton, and its great cavernous eyes stared up at us from out of its pinched and withered face. It was attended by a little brother, about five years old, who was rocking the cradle, and to divert its attention the little fellow had strong two tin cups on each of its arms, which, as he rocked the cradle, would jingle and make a little music and excitement for the babe. Standing close by was a sister, perhaps seven years old, as neatly clad as the mother.

That Mr. Packard might be enlightened, I said to the woman:

"Why don't you sit in here and sew, instead of sitting out there in the cold?"

She replied:

"I can't see in here. I sit out there so that I can see to sew."

And so the poor woman sat sewing away in the cold, raw, outside atmosphere, to earn money for that sick babe and bread for the others. Rather a tough business that, even for the son of the year; but what will that woman do when the bitter days of Winter come?

Perhaps you would like to go down there, and see that scene for yourselves. I will tell you where to go. Strike for New Lowery, through Chambers street, or go down from Chatham Square; and ask the first policeman you come upon to show you Oak street, and to show you Fish Alley. He can do it. You pass through that alley, and you come to a block of brick tenement houses; the extreme corner on the right is where this woman lived. You go down into that basement, and there you will find her, unless through failing means she has been obliged to leave that wretched place for one more wretched stall.

I asked her how much she could earn. And she said, when she had good luck and could get work all the time, and the baby did not require so much time and attention, she could earn four dollars a week. She paid one dollar and twenty cents a week for her room; leaving two dollars and seventy-five cents for food, and fuel, and lights, and clothes, and medicine, and doctor's bills. The food, and the fuel, and the lights, and the medicine had to be first supplied; and there was nothing left for clothing, and that is why she and her children were in such a plight.

You must excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, if I run largely to children this evening. When I come to talk on these subjects, so many poor, little, suffering faces of perishing children at once come up before me that I can seldom talk about anything else. The only thing that ever impelled me to make the investigations which I have made was my sympathy for these children, and my hope of finding some means to benefit them. And when I talk to audiences, or single individuals, I always remember their sympathies also in behalf of these children, of whom we have 40,000—poor, suffering, destitute, outcast children—in New York.

People often say they would like to hunt out and help the poor, if they only knew how to do it—how to find them out. I will tell you one very easy way. When a woman comes to your house to wash, iron, or scrub, or do anything of the kind, just take the trouble to ask her where she lives and how she is situated. Go home with her, or let your wife go, and you will find things which would make a thrilling newspaper or magazine article. I once found in Tenth street, in a garret, a poor woman with two children—one five years old, paralyzed from his hips down, and crawling about the floor on his hands and dragging his feet; the other a child of three years, and the mother was so weak and feeble that she could not take her children with her. There is not a family in this city, or in Westchester county, including my own, that does not have a woman to bring her children with her when she comes to the house to work. What did that woman do? She put a plate of brown bread, and a bottle of water, and a cup on the floor, and then at 6 o'clock in the morning, she turned the key of those children, and left them all day long on the street, leaving the little crippled sister to take such care as she could for herself. Dry after day, when the child went out, these little children would be left in that way. Now, what is to be done about such cases, ladies and gentlemen? I cannot tell. I don't know what to do; there are so many of these suffering little ones.

Probably, in passing along the street, you have met little girls selling penny songs. Perhaps they have occurred to you. I remember a little one, about six years old, who used to loiter about on a street corner, her mother being lame, and she had to support the family. I saw her one day, and she was so much like a poor, old, decrepit woman, that I could not help feeling for her. I asked her little girl, one day, what she did for a living. She said she sold penny songs, and she had to support the family. I asked her how she did that. She said she had a little book of songs, and she sold them for a penny each. I asked her how she got the songs. She said she had a friend who was a composer, and he gave her the songs. I asked her how she got the book. She said she had a friend who was a printer, and he gave her the book. I asked her how she got the money. She said she had a friend who was a bookseller, and he gave her the money. I asked her how she got the book. She said she had a friend who was a printer, and he gave her the book. I asked her how she got the money. She said she had a friend who was a bookseller, and he gave her the money.

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